

ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

Official Publication of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English

Vol. 42, No. 2

Urbana, Illinois

November, 1954

Published every month except June, July, August, and September. Subscription price, \$2.00 per year; single copies, 25 cents. *Entered as second-class matter October 29, 1941, at the post office at Urbana, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879.* Communications may be addressed to J. N. Hook, 121 Lincoln Hall, Urbana, Illinois, or to co-editor Wilmer Lamar, Decatur, Illinois, High School.

Creative Writing Based on Reading

By RUTH A. SHEPHERD

A speaker once said that, when he was a boy, his family gave this advice to beginners who came out to the farm to pick blackberries: "Stick to your vine and never run all over the patch." This bit of homely philosophy is also a good one to follow in writing a paper or in giving a talk. I shall try not to "run all over the patch," but there are a few points I wish to bring out at first that are not strictly "Creative Writing Based on Reading"; however, they are ideas that lead, I think, into the topic.

In the first place, the importance of the teacher in guiding pupils into the adventure of writing cannot be over-emphasized. Her enthusiasm, encouragement, praise, understanding—all these make a tremendous impact on a pupil's readiness and desire to write.

Then, after the teacher has come to know a class, she can think of topics appealing to a child's imagination or to what he knows about and likes (encouraging him to suggest some ideas, too). Also, in her files, she may have other themes to read for inspiration, helping the slow or unimaginative pupil to see what *can* be done, and inspiring the good student to greater endeavor. (This last device you have no doubt tried many times; the same one worked successfully with you when you heard other themes read to you in college composition. Professor Charles Swain Thomas used it with us—a post-graduate class—in Harvard University.) We gain confidence when we hear the efforts of others.

Furthermore, we give a pupil self-confidence when we always remember to encourage and praise him for what is good in a theme, be it only for one phrase or one adjective; he will try harder next

Just across the line from Illinois, Miss Shepherd teaches in the high school in Platteville, Wisconsin. She has had remarkable success in getting her students to write colorfully—and coherently. In this article she reveals some of her secrets.

time. Make him feel successful; nothing succeeds, indeed, like success, of course. Even in remedial English I have had pupils cheerfully re-copy a revised theme four times, simply radiating happiness when they achieved the first "A" in their short lives.

After we have suggested topics and read other themes, let us start writing. Let's have fun doing some one-paragraph themes first, a "time-sequence" theme, I call it—the best possible type of writing to make a pupil see what is meant by "coherence." We build one together in class first from a topic sentence, such as "John climbed the ladder to the high dive." This really becomes a free-for-all paragraph, because everyone—even the slow pupil—is eager to contribute a sentence developing John's progress through shuddering hesitation up the ladder and to the end of the diving-board, or through his masterly exhibition of a graceful swan or gainer. (We always assume at this point that there *is* water in the pool, although there are the hard-hearted wags who prefer a surprise, and sanguinary, ending.) I encourage them to develop a surprise ending, a punch line that the more ingenious delight in contriving.

After building a paragraph *together* and putting in some extra decorative words, we have a laboratory period in class for their own first themes, with *pre*vision and *re*vision before handing in the paper. In writing the paragraph, we try to get just the coherent essentials first, then put in "decorations" —that is, work in unusual adjectives, adverbs, sentence types (especially complex for sentence variety), an occasional participial phrase. Urge them to put their clever ideas rapidly on paper first without too much regard for form and variety; then revise and revise again, injecting changes into sentence types with colorful, descriptive words and figures. Work in a simile or metaphor or two, also, but more of that later.

Several topic sentences pupils have enjoyed for "time-sequence" themes are the following:

- 1—Cautiously I approached the haunted house.
- 2—The plane took off from the carrier.
- 3—The spy slithered toward the dug-out.
- 4—He got in position for the final shot.
- 5—The boy went down for the third time.
- 6—Carefully I applied a match to the fuse.

The teacher can think of other "starter" lines appealing to the imagination, and appealing to the *thought that such a paragraph will be easy to write, after all*. Some students will find themselves wanting to write more than one theme when they get over the hump of starting. Some will cleverly place the topic sentence later in the paragraph. Come theme day, they await the reading of their papers

with real enthusiasm. Following are three of such themes written by sophomores. (The titles are, of course, their own. I insist on a magnetic or dynamic title, one that makes you want to read the theme.)

BLAZE OF GLORY

The plane took off from the carrier. Pilot Jim Kane was determined to get into that raid, so much so, in fact, that he didn't report his broken ignition switch. As he flew, he glanced over his instruments, and, to his horror, saw that he had enough gas left for about four more minutes of flying. He looked around and saw a Jap ammunition base about half a mile away. He decided quickly on his course, climbed to 30,000 feet, and dived almost vertically on the base. His speed was climbing steadily—500—520—550 miles per hour. He was trembling with excitement as he neared the base that would be his exit in glory from this world. Then he felt a bump on his head. He staggered and woke up as the sergeant entered the K.P. tent and told him to get to work on the rest of the potatoes.

THE FINAL SHOT

As he got in position for the final shot, I steadied myself and watched him closely. Even though the future rested on this one essential shot, he appeared calm and collected. He raised his muscular arm, and in his hand was the instrument of fate. He stood there, poised and alert. He fingered the implement lovingly, then looked at me and smiled with confidence.

I closed my eyes; I could not bear to watch his ease, when I was nearly fainting with fright. Then, even with my eyes closed, I knew the time had come. This was it. Fifteen seconds and the anxiety, the fear, the restlessness were all over. Now all I had to do was to wait and see whether I was negative or positive.

THE THIRD TIME

The boy went down for the third time. The first time had come as a complete surprise to him, but he seemed to sense that a second time was coming. He did not struggle—he was wise enough to know that that would be useless. There was no one to call to for help, and he felt as alone as the branches of a tree after they had shed their gorgeous, autumn leaves.

A sickening feeling of despair surged through his entire body as he tried to force himself to be brave and calm. He went down with mingled feelings of dread, fear, and even hopefulness. He was hoping he would never have to go down to his draft board again.

Now—back to "Creative Writing Based on Reading"! How can we overcome the traditional anathema associated with writing longer themes, and with themes that may be an outgrowth of some literary masterpiece?

In the first place, as was mentioned before, the teacher can be enthusiastic; she can think of some topics that catch a spark and are fun to work on. In writing a paper, *beginning* is difficult, and if we can get a pupil happily started, half the proverbial combat is over. If topics relate to his *own* experiences or appeal to his *humor* or *imagination*, his writing momentum may be amazing even to himself. (He will probably tell you so. And more than once you have had some pupil come in and say, "When are we going to have another theme? I have an idea!")

Let us consider writing a paper after reading *Beowulf*. We have discussed the story, noted Anglo-Saxon personal characteristics, conned examples of Anglo-Saxon writing: kennings, alliteration, rhythm, onomatopoeia, singing of scops, mead-hall activities, possible personifications. (Is Grendel a personification of war, famine, disease? The fire drake, of forest fires?) Now we are ready to write. Shall we discuss some of the above characteristics listed, trace the ideals of Anglo-Saxon manhood, detect signs of added Christian touches, or compare early poetry with other verse? Oh no, let's not. (We've reviewed all that in class discussions, anyway.)

Instead, let's go on a journey with some Vikings, plowing the uncharted seas in a single sail wave-skimmer with a dragon on the bow—perhaps to America with Beowulf or with Leif Ericson. (Who really discovered America is always good for an argument.) Maybe some sailor will write a diary of the journey—kennings and all . . . or one could write a modern radio account, blow-by-blow, of the battle between Grendel and Beowulf, putting in a few modern kennings and alliteration for effect. "Mead-hall memories" has been a topic (treated with discretion, I insist) for several playlets, very amusing ones, too. One girl wrote a modern epic of the battle, done in football style. Several students have composed Anglo-Saxon riddles after the manner of the scops of old, Don ingeniously weaving a letter of Beowulf's name at the beginning of each line of his riddle. Beverly went way back into Iberian or old Celtic prehistoric days, writing a charming little play about three cave women having afternoon fruit juice in a cozy cave-home. (One guest knew it was time to go home because her leaf-necklace was wilting.) And so our thoughts have run on—with creative talent and imagination and often humor mingled.

But what pleases the teacher most of all is the mounting enthusiasm and interest shown in *writing themes*. Always there is a clamor to have the themes read in class—reason enough for everyone to do his best and have his theme admired. (The grapevine has gone around before class, revealing whose themes are most interesting.) Oddly enough, no one wants to read his own. Is it

self-consciousness or what? Anyway, the teacher is conscripted to read; or better still, she selects a student who reads well.

Back, for a moment, to similes and metaphors! Writing them can be lots of fun. Never have sophomores attacked an assignment with such verve as did a class of mine last semester. We talked about modern slang with its metaphorical aspects first, then to the beauty (enhanced by figurative language) in poems like "The Highwayman" and "The Raven" (always perennial favorites anyway). Then we decided to do some similes and metaphors of our own, choosing little (or big) things in everyday life and trying to find something unusual or colorful for a comparison. Here are only a few of the dozens of results:*

The tall, stately Indian warrior looked like a long piece of brown stick-cinnamon.

The girl's scarf looked like an artist's palette.

A blizzard is like straw blowing from a threshing machine.

The Negro woman was like a wrinkled and shrivelled raisin.

His red head was like a sizzling firecracker just going off.

The bunny's fur is like a dish of freshly-whipped egg whites.

The airport is like a mass of silver slivers as the beacons are flashed on.

The cobwebs of the old house are wisps of cotton candy in the weird light.

(One inarticulate country boy wrote over 20 such comparisons.)

It so happened that, shortly after, we read *Julius Caesar* in the same class. I found them sensitive to the figurative in Shakespeare's noble lines and able to paraphrase the more difficult passages with considerable ease; they knew how to think in such terms after their experience in composing lines of their own; and they were much more appreciative of the poet's talent.

And what do we write about after finishing the play? Let's not kill high school interest by assigning topics suitable for college level. We shall have discussed plot advancement and turning-point, psychological aspects of individual characters, mob psychology, humor, the supernatural. We shall have paraphrased and memorized the best-known lines and have had a contest in line recognition. But let's have something fresh and different for writing. How about a modern newspaper account of the assassination, together with clues as to the discovery of the conspiracy, warnings, motives? Or perhaps an on-the-spot radio announcer would give the incident

* Used as "fillers" in our magazine, the best of the colorful ideas made a big hit—and swelled our list of contributors to over 60; we call those sections "Toward a More Colorful Line."

more punch. Or what if Caesar *had* listened to Calpurnia, after all? How about Artemidorus, the teacher of rhetoric? Was it just intuition, or where did he get his information before writing the note of warning to Caesar? What became of Calpurnia, in your opinion? Write a scroll in complete form of a letter thrown into Brutus's window. Write a "take-off" scene for any part of the play. How about a day with Julius and Calpurnia at home, or a day with Julius in his chariot on the road from Gaul? (You may get some recent movie retakes with this one.) . . . *You* are in the Forum the night before the Ides of March; what were *your* reactions to horrible happenings and whizzing meteors? Did you scuttle home, or did you brave it out? Brutus, the "noblest Roman of them all"—why? Can you find modern counterparts of any three people in the play—either in this country, in this school, or in the world today? What type are they? Describe motives also.

Speaking of take-offs, I found this theme in my files, a revamp of an amusing scene from *The Tempest* written by a junior boy:

NOT GUILTY, YOUR HONOR

Enter Stephano, Trinculo, and last but not least, (intoxicated) Caliban slurping through the sludge. The illuminated triumvirate joins intermittently (except when some standard term is necessary to convey the message) in a chorus of Q.U.E.'s*. (See foot notes.)

STEPHANO: How in the name of the place where the south west winds blow did Prospero get here? (Stumbles on a root and falls in the mud.)

CALIBAN: Methinks, hic, Master, they called it a galley.

TRINCULO: Oh, I kitchen. Coming from you, though, it sounds pretty fishy.

A schooner of port (don't ask me what port) is circulated, and three noses take on a renewed phosphorescence. A rural chorus ensues.

TRINCULO: Here's mud in your eye, Scandinavian (flipping a luxurious blob of swamp algae.)

CALIBAN: Wha-da-ya mean, Scandinavian, huh?

STEPHANO: Look at the fins. Ho, ho.

CALIBAN: You two mugs better butler up your mouths or I'll jester 'bout drown you.

TRINCULO: Hark, I hear sounds of the hunt. To cover, men.

All three crawl under Caliban's gabardine and argue as to the best medium of escape.

CALIBAN: (excitedly) Flee. Flee.

STEPHANO: I've felt 'em, too.

TRINCULO: Quick, Henry, the Flit.

Enter Ariel following a pack of dachshunds.

* Q.U.E. . . . quaint, unprintable expletives (please don't show the censors) such as "Dear me," "Goodness gracious," "For land sakes," etc., etc., etc.

ARIEL: Hi, Old Silver, away.

Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo struggle under the cloak and fall in a writhing mass.

"But what value," you ask, "can such a theme possible have?" And I answer that it is not only fun for its own sake, but it is a bit of heaven for a whole class, helping us all (and mixing a metaphor) to catch the spirit of the play itself, what else? Also, the skit has been an outlet for not a few puns (some not so bad) and much roguish humor. And maybe the whole class will remember Shakespeare with more affection.

With the study of *Macbeth*, we always have a few sleuths who solve the mystery of the Glamis Castle window—and some very resourcefully contrived solutions we have had. (Pupils enjoy being detectives or adventurers or royalty—who knows what complexes such thoughts may cure?) . . . And what happened to Fleance? The idea opens such avenues of discovery for a story . . . Donalbain never came back in the play; what happened to him? . . . What if Duncan were only playing possum, as one senior suggested—then how would the play have ended? . . . Or shall we trace the inception of "vaulting ambition" through to its climax and final downfall? You may choose.

But don't you think this is rather a clever bit of sleuthing?

THE MYSTERIOUS LIGHT

One cold, stormy, foggy night as I was sitting in my office in London, I received a rush call to take a case in Glamis. You see, I work for Scotland Yard, and blimey, if it weren't about this same castle that I was reading as the telephone rang. It seems there is a mystery shrouded in Glamis about a light in a window that has shone intermittently for centuries without explanation. 'Twas therefore my duty, being a master-mind detective, to solve the case and determine the cause of the light.

Being very bright in all sciences and being one, if not the best, detective at Scotland Yard, I knew that in a few days I could resolve an explanation for the "phenomenon," so I packed my bags and left for Glamis . . .

After solving a most trifling case—it took me but a matter of hours, I decided to go to the castle. As I approached the surrounding territory, I could see the gray castle rising in the heavy mist. My shoes made a clattering noise on the cobblestones as I approached the castle. The gate was open, so I walked in. The wall around the castle acted as a windbreaker from the chilly ocean blasts. I went to the massive oak door and lifted the knocker and let it fall heavily on the plate behind. After a short lapse of time, I heard footsteps approaching the door, the little "cubby-hole" opened, two pale eyes peered out at me, and then with a creak, the door opened . . .

I was now outside again with the proprietor showing me the mysterious window. Sure enough, I could see a light shining from the window. It wasn't like the illumination that would come from a gaslight—I could see that—it was more of a constant light. I took out my black note book and wrote a short note about it. I asked the proprietor questions, but he refused to answer them. He told me that I could work on an explanation of my own, but that he would never verify my statement.

I proceeded without the help of my impudent little man, but he was kind enough to invite me to stay over night. I was now more determined than ever to find out the cause of the light in the window. The proprietor went in the house, but I stayed outside to look over the surrounding terrain.

I looked at the window from as many different angles as I could and still remain in the courtyard. The light seemed no different from the many angles. I wrote this down in my black book along with a drawing of the yard. I went to bed feeling more satisfied than when I came but still not feeling as a detective should. I slipped into my slippers and decided to search the part of the building where I figured the window should be.

After stumbling along the dimly lighted halls, I came to my destination. There was nothing to behold but solid wall and windows, and an old linen-cabinet, which was locked. There were no rooms on the side where the window should be. The windows were all barred, so I could not stick my head out. The next morning I went home . . .

I read all of the following afternoon at the library on the history that had been accumulated. I later arrived at the most ingenious conclusion. First I found out, through my extensive research, that the castle was originally built and owned by people with the name of Montag. They were thought to be smugglers, but no one ever could prove anything. Since the castle is near the ocean, it would prove to be an excellent spot for such work. The heir who now lives there is a direct descendant of the Montags as were the owners before him. Therefore, I solved the mystery with the following conclusion: the window was originally used to signal approaching ships with the smuggled goods. After the later generations took over, they sealed up the window after laying a shiny piece of metal over it. After their job was finished, they realized that the metal caused a reflection on certain phases of the moon, so they switched their name to Montag to explain this "phenomenon" in case any one did research. Montag means "Moonday"—during the day there is light—therefore, moonlight. Thus have they sealed their early history; only I, as master detective, have exposed their motive, but only to one ear, mine, for I will do nothing about it. It does ease my inquisitive mind, however.

What about Chaucer? Is he hopelessly antiquated and completely without appeal? Not at all—in fact, his charm seems peren-

nial. After we appreciate his characterizations, learn a few lines by rote as a sample of what our language was like in ye goode olde dayes, have special reports on "The Patient Griselda" and the "Knight's Tale," we are ready to write. Let's write another Canterbury tale, moral and all. Or let us imagine ourselves to be one of the pilgrims; we are having a picnic lunch en route when a highwayman attacks us; the Wyf of Bath (or some other character) saves the day; how does it all turn out? . . . A modern "Prolog" has brought forth many a clever counterpart in school or bus . . . We stop at Tabard Inn, visiting with guests and landlord; what about local color and conversations? Chaucer visits our high school; what and who impress him most? . . . Why not write a diary during the four-day horseback trip, telling the chief happenings? . . . We see or experience a Canterbury healing. (Several deeply spiritual stories have followed the last suggestion.) Yes, Chaucer may have a vivid and deep appeal for moderns.

Ivanhoe and *Silas Marner* lend themselves beautifully to imaginative story and essay. I have had lengthy or brief newspapers about each, newspapers including news stories about actual happenings in the novels; pictures, original or cut from magazines or movies; weather reports, ads about blacksmith work, dress materials, flint boxes, weaving, armour, herbs; feature stories about parties, school items, inn activities.

A favorite topic for *Silas Marner* is another chapter to the story, often depicting Silas's further happiness with Eppie's children; or finding William Dane who has, at long last, become consciousness-stricken—or poisoned. Eppie went to a "Dame's School"—describe a day there; was Aaron a pupil, too? Was he interested in Eppie then—protectively, or putting her pigtails in the inkwell? Some themes about Silas have preserved the Raveloe flavor and accent remarkably.

And *Ivanhoe*! What a chance for more deeds of derring-do in writing! Living in Sherwood Forest as a member of Robin's gang gives a chance for a good imaginative stretch. Or what was *Ivanhoe*'s life like before the beginning of the story. Describe the scene in which his father disinherits him . . . What if Rebecca *had* become interested in the Templar and had escaped with him during her trial? One boy followed them to Bagdad on a flying carpet after exchanging a few amenities with Sinbad the Sailor. Rebecca, a favorite with teen-agers, has done much to improve sympathy with her nationality among students. (They seem to find Rowena rather anemic—albeit blonde.) Loving sad and gory endings as pupils nowadays sometimes do, they still yearn for Rebecca to find happiness. Last year one sophomore girl contrived a romance

for her with Robin Hood. Another—having tossed Rowena to Athelstane, paired the Jewess with Ivanhoe.

But what about the writing of serious essays? Having read the Bible essay on the ideal wife, seniors have written on their ideals of friends, sweethearts, family, teachers, and schools—a natural follow-up and often an eye-opening one.

But after Lamb's "Dissertation on Roast Pig" come the tallest tales of all. I suggest that they tell how *their* favorite food came to be prepared that way. Ice cream, popcorn, and fried chicken seem to be the favorites. One wrote on frogs' legs which he admitted he had never eaten. But for sheer Paul Bunyan proportions, Ronald's essay topped them all, a story of two desperadoes in a tornado—the result, ice cream! How he achieved this ending makes fearsome and wonderful reading, and the class heard it with wide-eyed amusement and admiration. (The teacher was also wide-eyed.) However, I think my favorite is Dean's essay "On a Liliacea," its hero a little pig of sorts called Aardvark. Following is most of it:

ON A LILIACEA

Man in his stay on earth has found many ways to stave off hunger. He has eaten everything from marshmallows to muskmelons and seems to have had a fairly good time doing it. In fact, one isn't likely to find many people walking about who don't like to eat. Their kind always dies young . . .

I have made a survey of my own about the culinary idiosyncrasies of man. I've found men who had a passion for roast pig, yogurt, sow belly, humming bird tongues, or well-chewed blubber, but strange to say I haven't found many who like my favorite food, onions! I think this is because they have lost sight of the true onion . . .

As you may or may not know, onions were first discovered in Germany, or so the folk tale goes, and this seems to be the most reliable source I can find . . . This is the way it happened. One day, long, long ago, a man named Wolfgang was out walking his small son and his prize pig, Aardvark. Aardvark was stepping along quite daintily for her three hundred pounds when suddenly her ears came up, her tail went sideways, her head went down, and she began rooting furiously in the soft earth of the forest clearing. She came up munching on a bulbous sort of thing, a stalk hanging out of her mouth and a dreamy, contented look in her azure eyes.

In those days pigs were pretty important people, not degraded and defamed as they are now. So when a pig was found munching something suspicious, the easiest way to find out whether it was good for him or not was to feed some to a small child, since children react more quickly than pigs. This Wolfgang proceeded to do with celerity, the urchin having been caught after a short chase. Much

to Wolfgang's surprise, a look of ecstasy came over the boy's face and in a few seconds, the boy, too, was rooting in the soft ground.

Now Wolfgang was nobody's fool; and he realized there must be something special about anything that would make the boy root in the ground, so, following the precedent set by Aardvark and his son, he began an amateurish imitation of his son's actions. When he finally found one and gingerly nibbled on it, he understood. He became the second mortal ever to taste—an onion! The word spread quickly, and soon, of an afternoon, the whole populace of the village, pigs and all, could be seen rooting in the onion patch.

But this happy state did not last forever. Radicals began to make exception to and modify the ancient traditions of onion eating. One ungrateful cad started the fad of digging onions instead of rooting for them; another suggested eating meat with your onions. Out of the latter sprang the hateful idea that meat could be eaten alone. And so through the spiteful work of wretches like these, modern man has lost contact with the onion. True, many go out to the farmers' market to buy some large, juicy onions to chew on during the long winter evenings, but they have lost the true spirit of adventure of the ancient days. To really appreciate them, work for them, thus gaining the added satisfaction of attaining a goal.

Please excuse me now. I must go in to wipe the dirt from my face.

Then to another type of essay: After discussing *The Spectator*, we may have surprisingly modern and pertinent follow-ups—serious, humorous, provocative. For example, what reforms are needed in our school? How can we improve movie manners? What do *you* think of fresh-air fiends? Maybe *you* have struggled with furnace or lawnmower, snow shovel or rowboat, winning or losing the battle; and telling about it might be very entertaining. Haven't we some pet peeves we'd like to get off our minds—and chests? (Such essays may provide a good opportunity to get some chips off shoulders.)

I like this one:

SATAN'S KIN

From the time the world began—and I suppose, until it ends—the most diabolical and satanic creature known to man, the scourge of my life, the curse of the world, is the fresh-air fiend. No matter where I've been, where I am, or where I'm going, I find one person is always there with me—the fresh-air fiend. When I die, my most fervent wish is that, despite where I may end up, there'll be no fresh-air fiends there.

Why, do you know that fresh-air fiends have altered the course of history? Take Julius Caesar, for instance. Julius Caesar was born in about 100 B.C. He lived a normal life. He grew up during his childhood and became the dictator of the entire known world. Now here's where historians changed the facts a little and made the story more dramatic for literary purposes. The real truth about his death is that Julius Caesar caught pneumonia and died. His wife had nagged and warned him about spring weather. To use a

direct quote, she said, "Beware the Ides* of March!" Just to show her who wore the pants in the family, Julius threw on his toga and tramped out into the rain on his way to the Senate. He was soaked clear through when he arrived. Brutus, a cursed fresh-air fiend, insisted on opening a window; and so, because of a fresh-air fiend, Julius Caesar caught cold and died.

Of course, there are always skeptics who still believe learned historians in that Julius Caesar died of knife wounds. Even if he did die because he was stabbed by Brutus—mind you, I'm not admitting it; I'm just saying "if"—Brutus had to enter through an open door or window, and who always leaves doors and windows open? Ha! The fresh-air fiend!

I have proved conclusively that fresh-air fiends are a menace to mankind and that they ought to be abolished. My suggestion is to have a "Get Rid of Fresh-Air Fiends Week" and free the world of its plague.

After reading a beautifully descriptive masterpiece like Conrad's "The Lagoon," I suggest short descriptive themes requiring careful and colorful vocabulary and imagination. Word portrayal unfolding a picture or the striving for a single effect may be fascinating—effects like tranquillity, sadness, shadows, eeriness, cheerfulness, to name a few. These two illustrate what I mean:

LONESOME

The shack was merely a mass of unshaped planks, tin, tar paper, and other débris. To one from the city it might have looked as if a truck had accidentally dumped this conglomeration of junk in the wrong place. From the crooked chimney a thin vapor-like thread of smoke rose at intervals. From the roof hung yellow-stained icicles a foot from the ground. The surroundings were barren except for an empty dog house with a few white bones scattered on the ground.

ONE OF MANY

The day was hot and humid. At the corner the small shop aptly called "Joe's Place" opened its doors to try to cool the torrid interior. The street reeked of strong onions, coffee, and frying meat. In this atmosphere, rotund Italian women leaned out of windows and shrieked orders to their heirs three stories below. In the filthy alleyway, the street's contribution to the coming generation wallowed in perfect contentment.

And now, perhaps the most difficult writing of all, poetry! Together we have read and appreciated what poets have to say in rhymes or free verse; and we are familiar with the figurative language of alliteration, metaphor, and simile. How can a teacher pull

* This is the nominative, masculine, plural form of the Latin word meaning rain.

some beauty or imagination—or both—in verse from doubtful but not always unwilling pupils? Again, let's look in our files and read from the papers others have written. Now, *we* can do as well as that, or better. *Beginning* is the difficult part. Let's start with a comparison, a simile. Something is *like* something else. Spring is like a pretty girl with flowers in her hair; the moon is a lady in a dancing frock of white. Choose something familiar, and elaborate on it. (One does not have to be in a highfaluting mood to compose poetry; think about it as you are going to school or coming home. I have written it after a heavy meal, but I do not recommend that as an auspicious time.) Gordon, a senior boy, composed this while riding with his family over a snowy landscape:

A WINTER PICTURE

The drifted, silent, shimmering snow
 Like soft, smooth marshmallow frosting
 Hiding the lumpy chocolate fields—
 The fenceposts, little unlit candles—
 The frosting is dotted with peppermint pine trees
 And the ribbons of roads make a carefree design.

But it seems to me that Jean's poem following is beautiful with a connotation and collocation seldom found in high school writing:

THE GREATEST SYMPHONY

The storm is a symphony
 Played by the masters of the heavens.
 The booming thunder of the kettle drums
 Accompanies a melodious piano, the rain.
 The sudden shriek of the violin
 Breaks forth as lightning out of the black,
 While the reeds take up the howling of the wind.
 The symphony dies; the conductor bows
 As the leaves lend their applause;
 The houselights gradually brighten.

Would you think that a lad with a chip on his shoulder could have poetic thoughts? He was an athlete (intercepted once in the hall where he was having a fist-fight with another boy; but take care lest we condemn him, for here is Bill in a softer mood).

THE SURF

The surf is like a wondrous orchestra,
 With its melodious beat; it booms,
 Like the large brass kettle-drum.
 The shrill wind whistles through the waves
 And whips the spray into a thousand

Notes of ecstasy. Hear those silver-throated
 Gulls on high; they, too, do their part,
 Taking the score of the high-pitched fife;
 From a feathery cloud, an angel's podium,
 God's hand directs the quells and swells,
 Which turn the world into a symphony
 Of vibrant delight.

Of course the poems are not all written in free verse. Some are quatrains, limericks, poems short and long. Not a few will be religious with a sincerity that has beauty all its own. Then there are boy and girl poems about love and friendship.

These quatrains written by juniors have caught a roguish or a philosophical spirit that a class will enjoy:

MUSICIAN

I play the flute in orchestra,
 The piccolo in band;
 But though I can play both of them,
 I'm not much in demand!

FRIENDSHIP'S RESPONSIBILITY

We always give our newer friends
 Considerate respect,
 But often older, truer friends are
 Victims of neglect.

JOBS

A job should fit your disposition,
 And should be very fitting.
 There are a few that aren't for me,
 For instance, baby-sitting.

SNOW JOKE

"What a beautiful snow!"
 That's poets' talk!
 It's obvious they
 Don't shovel the walk!

CLASSIC CONFLICT

"Virtue is its own reward,"
 With promises ethereal.
 They should, to combat tempting vice,
 Be somewhat more material.

BY A CHURCH USHER

(Not a quatrain, obviously)

Ushering Mrs. DeBrack
 Is a thing requiring a knack;

One goes up the aisle,
To find with a smile
That she's seated herself in the back.

Following is a riddle written by an All-American swimmer and runner-up for the Olympics (swimmers are not all brawn, you see).

RIDDLE

High in the sky over the bay,
He sits and looks the livelong day;
His face is distorted as all the rest,
But his view will always remain the best.
(The answer? *Top Man on a Totem Pole.*)

Several of these have been printed in the *Milwaukee Journal*, three with a background of special art work:

FORETASTE

I find spring
Each time I hear a sprightly tune
Whistled on the street,
Or when I watch an icicle
Drip soundlessly to meet
The snow; but when I feel
A mild breeze gently touch my cheek,
I know—it's spring!

VALSE CAPRICE

Spring is like a ballerina
Dancing in on twinkling toes
Waking up the weary world.
The newborn leaves arise from hiding
Reaching for the glorious sun.
The violets nod their velvet heads;
The wind is lilting through the trees
In harp accompaniment.

Following my suggestion to write on "something you know about," a seventeen-year-old assayed this:

AGE SEVENTEEN

I have a car—a '34.
It cost me 35.
And it has cost me 60 more
To keep the thing alive.

One time it's all assembled fine
With noisy, charging roar;
And next day there it is again
Spread on the cellar floor.

The hours of talk, the rush of friends,
Discouragement and joy!
A can of paint—the fenders off—
A healthy teen-age boy!

If a pupil is musical, perhaps he would like to write a song and compose the music for it. This last year a senior boy did both in a poem called "Alma Mater." It caught on so well that the class sang it as a farewell commencement number. One musician, too, chose "How to Enjoy a Symphony" for his "long paper" topic.

But of all poetry, I believe the sonnet is the most difficult medium, having so much compression of thought and emotion within its fourteen-line matrix—so difficult that only a few brave and talented souls will try it. This one by Karl, printed in the *Milwaukee Journal*, was also published in the *N.E.A. Journal*:

OF WAR AND PEACE

When oft I look at news of war and peace,
And hear of international intrigue,
And see how nations' quarrels never cease—
When I am told of land which league on league
Is soaked with blood and strewn with steel, as greed
And prejudice and ignorance lead men
And nations in the fatal path and creed
Of ruthless war and desolation—then
I ask why, after man rebuilds the ruin,
And plows the fields, and plants and harvests grain,
And makes all o'er a world of peace, he soon
Sends troops of bigotry to march again.
Oh Lord, teach us who dwell on earth that we
Must live in love of fellowman—like Thee.

Sonnet, free verse, quatrain, whatever the medium—after pupils compose poetry of their own, they have a much more sensitive appreciation of what poets have done.

In conclusion, one of the joys of teaching is touching off the spark that kindles a pupil's creative fancy; what follows may be colorful and imaginative beyond a teacher's dreams.